

The Story Of Fort Mason

Historic U.S. Army Post In San Francisco

Although Fort Mason was proclaimed as a United States Army military reservation on November 6, 1850, by President Millard Fillmore, the story of the site as a strategic military outpost goes back to the very beginnings of San Francisco.

In 1776, the Spanish Lieutenant Jose Joaquin Moraga established a military post on the heights at the entrance to the Golden Gate, now the Presidio of San Francisco.

Mounted patrols from the Presidio frequently galloped over the sand dunes to the highest point of the promontory they called Punta Medanos (now Fort Mason) a mile and a half to the east along San Francisco Bay.

In 1797, Governor Diego de Borica decided to strengthen his defenses against any foreign vessels which might seek to enter the Golden Gate to anchor in the quiet cove immediately to the east of Point Medanos. It is now known as Aquatic Park.

Since the Punta Medanos promontory commanded not only the cove but also the passage between the mainland and Alcatraz Island it was chosen as the ideal spot to fortify. Consequently, de Borica sent a battery of five brass cannon to Point Medanos. They were eight-pounders and were probably also sighted to support El Castillo San Joaquin (Fort Point), founded on the Presidio earlier.

The new post was named Bateria San Jose in honor of Saint Joseph. The point soon became known as Point San Jose, second of the four names the Fort Mason area has carried.

BATTERY ABANDONED

The battery was soon neglected. In 1806, Governor Arrillega's inspection report read, *There was not even a hut for the gunners and the guns were rendered useless by exposure.*

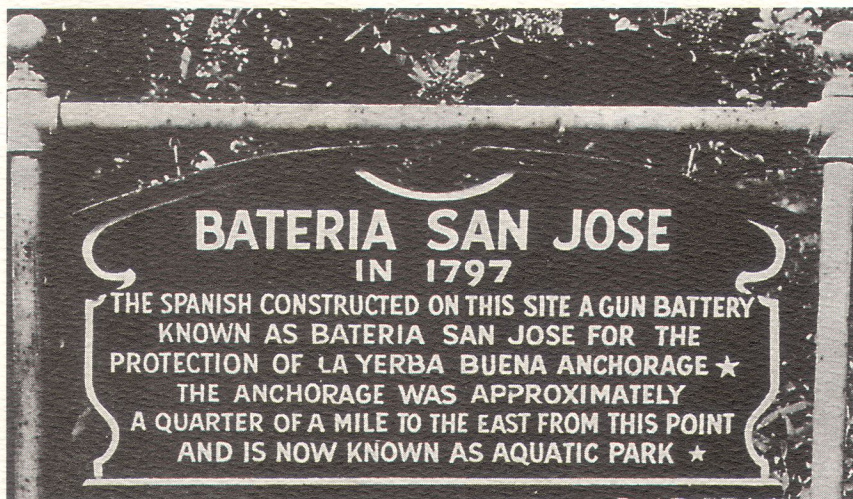
Point San Jose reverted to sand dunes and scrub brush, much of it dark laurel, which gave the area its third name, Black Point, one which survives occasionally to this day.

MEXICO TAKES OVER

The Spanish rule was terminated when Mexico won its freedom in 1822 and California became a part of Mexico. A new flag flew over Point San Jose. San Francisco spread out from the Mission Dolores compound. A flourishing business in hides arose, bringing Yankee traders. Many sails dotted the great harbor.

The United States went to war with Mexico in 1846 and took possession of all of California.

The following year, Col. Richard Barnes Mason, military governor of California, had a survey of the military reservations on the San Francisco peninsula made. The Presidio of San Francisco and Point San Jose were included, and on November 6, 1850, President Millard Fillmore by Executive Order reserved for public use the areas marked off by Colonel Mason.



THIS SIGN, AT THE NORTHERN END OF FORT MASON, MARKS THE LOCATION OF A 17TH CENTURY SPANISH ARTILLERY INSTALLATION.



THIS PICTURE WAS REPRODUCED FROM AN 1865 - 7 PAINTING NOW HANGING IN MCDOWELL HALL, FORT MASON. IT SHOWS BLACK POINT (FORT MASON) AND ADJACENT AREA.

The Point San Jose site was not immediately occupied by the Army. Its forces in the San Francisco Bay Area were thin and those few available were generally occupied in quieting Indian uprising, protecting surveying parties mapping the new territory, and in similar duties.

GOLD RUSH OCCUPATION

Meantime land-hungry settlers, brought West by the Gold Rush, were swarming into the city. The Point San Jose area looked inviting and squatters pitched their tents there. The first were torn down but with the Presidio boundaries to protect as well the small Army force couldn't cover all the ground and relaxed its efforts somewhat after its commanding officer was arrested by civil authorities for alleged interference with the rights of a citizen whom he had removed from United States property.

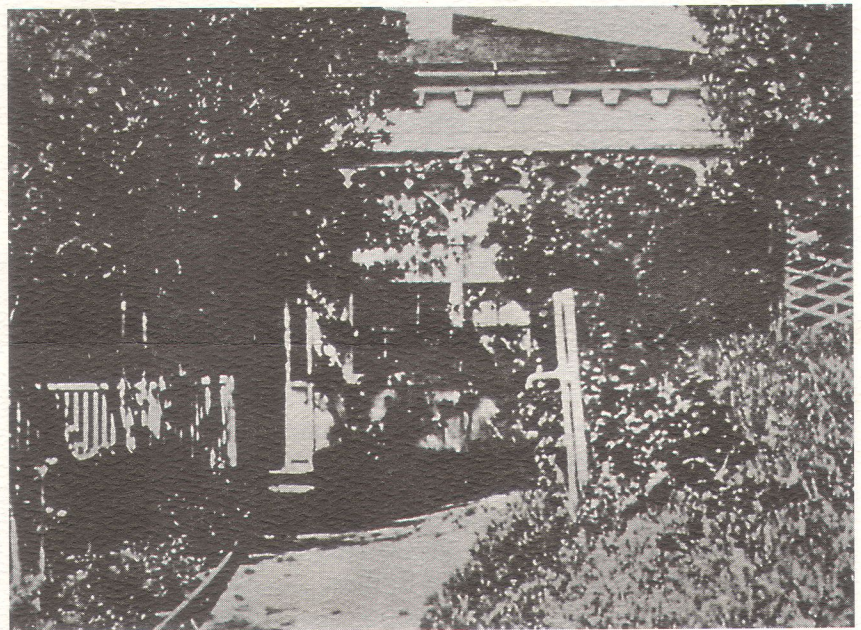
General Irvin McDowell wrote in 1866 concerning the situation existing in the early 50's as follows: *The files of my headquarters show that the place of San Jose was reserved by the United States military authorities in 1847, while it yet formed a part of Mexico; that it was formally reserved by the President in 1850 and 1851, and that those who seized it did so knowing that it was land reserved for public purposes. The single officer of artillery, who alone had to represent the general government with a small squad of men, attempted in vain to protect the public interests. He personally threw down the tents and huts of the squatters, and pulled up their stakes, but the government at Washington, if it then had long arms, had very feeble ones; and, before the war, not only States, but individuals defied it. Combinations of land-grabbers and land-jumpers so harassed this officer that he wrote in despair that he could not protect the government property, and in one of his letters reports: "They have seized on Point San Jose and have it in complete possession."*

Among the first private residents, according to Report No. 634 of the 46th Congress, Second Session, May 31, 1880, were a Leonidas Haskell and a George Eggleton. These men, the report said, *entered upon the land, found no one in possession, and built a large fence around a tract thereof. They and others continued in open, undisturbed and peaceable occupation until 1863, making valuable improvements, building houses and stables, planting shrubbery and flowers, paying taxes on assessment by the city. Property was freely bought, sold and mortgaged.*

Among these residents was John Charles Fremont, called "The Pathfinder." Fremont, then a private citizen, bought a tract and a house on Point San Jose from one Mark Bruni-gen, described as a banker, in 1859. Fremont was then operating a mine at Mariposa. The



PRESENT MC DOWELL HALL, SHOWN ABOVE, NOW USED AS A TRANSIENT AND AN OFFICERS' MESS, WAS OCCUPIED BY THE COMMANDING GENERALS OF THE ARMY'S WESTERN HEADQUARTERS FROM 1865 TO 1943. IT WAS ORIGINALLY BROOK HOUSE NO. 1, BUILT IN 1855 BUT CONSIDERABLY ENLARGED SINCE.



THIS PICTURE SHOWS PORTER'S LODGE, THE COTTAGE OCCUPIED BY THE FREMONT FAMILY AT FORT MASON FROM 1859 TO 1861. THE ONE STORY FRAME STRUCTURE OF GOTHIC REVIVAL DESIGN, BUILT IN 1855, WAS RAZED IN 1863 TO MAKE ROOM FOR GUN EMPLACEMENTS.

family says he paid \$40,000 for the house and 12 acres, mostly uplands and tidelands, on the northern tip of the promontory.

The same year that Fremont made his purchase the Army announced plans for completion of the fortification of San Francisco harbor. As published in *The State Register and Year Book of Facts*, 1859 edition, this plan proposed placing 50 guns on Point San Jose, plus others at Fort Point, Loma Point, Angel Island, Presidio Hill, and Alcatraz Island.

The Fremonts moved to New York in 1861, when he went into Federal military service, and the cottage was rented to a friend.

The Historical American Buildings Survey of the Department of the Interior and the American Institute of Architects describes the house, called "Porter's Lodge," as a one-story cottage of wood construction built in 1855 and appearing to have Gothic-revival wood details on the exterior. The description was based on an 1860 photograph. The survey said the house was built originally for George Eggleton, sold to a Mr. Noble, then to Haskell & Co., occupied by Palmer, Cook & Co. and then by Mark Brunigen, through whom the Fremonts acquired it. Other records say they enlarged it and built a stable and gardens.

In October 1863, with a Confederate privateer loose in the Pacific, the Army re-occupied Point San Jose and proceeded to re-fortify it. The private residents were removed and their buildings converted into quarters. The Fremont place was razed to make room for gun emplacements.

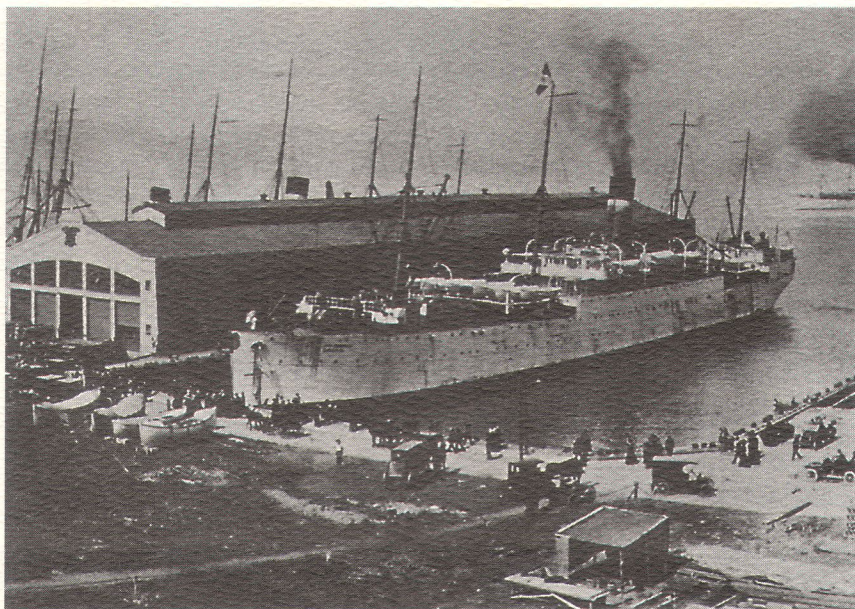
Rudolph Steinbach, the Fremonts, George Eggleton, Emil Grisar and others asserted legal title to the premises and claimed compensation for the destruction and loss of their property.

The precise question of title was put in issue before the Supreme Court of the United States in the 1867 December term with Emil Grisar as plaintiff and Irvin McDowell, Army general commanding the Department of the West and residing on Fort Mason, as defendant.

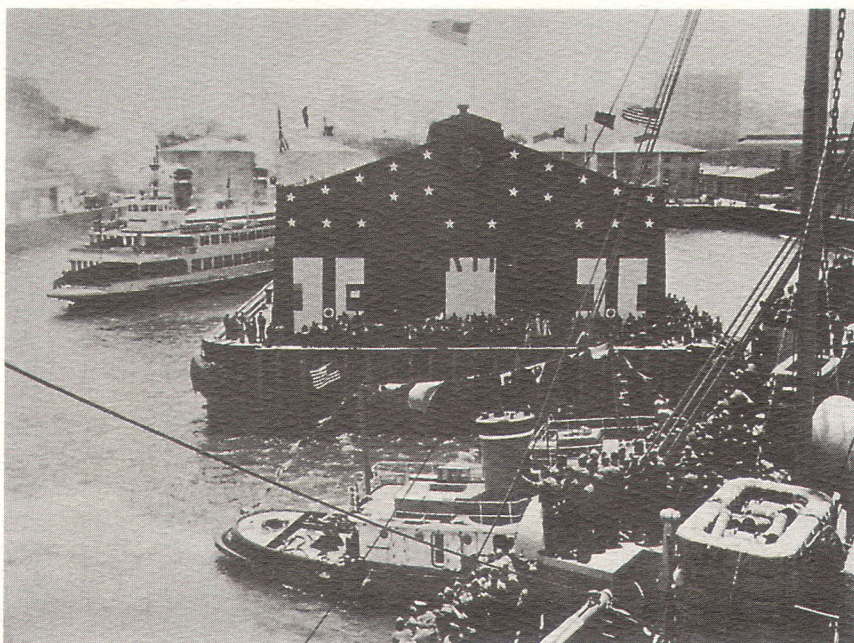
The Nation's highest court ruled for the Government, holding that the United States had full legal title to the land on the basis of President Fillmore's proclamation of 1850. The opinion, delivered by Justice

Field, held that the President may reserve lands for public use, that due notice of this reservation was on file in the office of the Surveyor-General of the United States for California, and that it was sufficient that the lands remained the property of the United States "whether or not they were by sufficient authority appropriated to public use." The court also took into consideration San Francisco's pueblo claims and the Van Ness Ordinance as well as decisions of other courts.

Since this adjudication no person has ever challenged in the courts the title of the United States to the area. Instead they have sought redress through petitions to the Secretary of the Army and through numerous special bills introduced in the Congress, particularly in behalf of the Fremont family.



THE ARMY BUILT PIERS AT FORT MASON IN 1910 - 11 TO TAKE CARE OF EXPANDING MILITARY TRAFFIC TO AND FROM THE PACIFIC. THE PICTURE ABOVE SHOWS PIER ACTIVITIES IN THE 1920'S.



FORT MASON WITNESSED THE HOME COMING OF THOUSANDS OF MILITARY VETERANS AFTER WORLD WAR II AND THE KOREAN WAR. ABOVE IS A TYPICAL 'WELCOME HOME - WELL DONE' GATHERING OF FAMILIES AND FRIENDS GREETING AN INCOMING TRANSPORT AT A FORT MASON PIER.

In August 1865, General McDowell appointed a board of survey to receive claims from those who had made improvements on the government property. Emil Grisar, whose place was called the "Big House" because it had an attic, asked \$7,780 for the buildings, grading, water tank, and water pipes. The board found his building to be worth \$2,000 and the other improvements \$1,500. Eggleton claimed \$2,000 and the board set the value of his building at \$500. In 1866 Mrs. Fremont asked the Secretary of War for \$250,000 as compensation for their property, according to the records.

In 1870, by Act of Congress, the United States released to the City of San Francisco about 45 acres of Point San Jose not being used for military purposes. The city conveyed this property, east of Van Ness and south of Bay, to occupants and/or owners.

Only one of the many bills introduced in the Congress ever became law. This was an 1893 measure referring the Fremont claims to the U. S. Court of Claims. The family filed suit for \$1,000,000. They did not follow up the case, however. After it had remained pending on the docket for 14 years the Court dropped it.

While the Fremont cottage was leveled in 1863 four present buildings trace their origins to the 1850's.

One of these is Mc Dowell Hall, presently housing the Transient Mess and the Officers' Open Mess. It was first known as Brook House for one of its early residents. After the Civil War it was turned into the official residence of the Commanding General of the Western Army and was designated Quarters No. 1.

Its first post-war occupant was Major General Irvin Mc Dowell to whose interest in landscaping is credited much of the credit for starting Fort Mason toward the park-like beauty it has today. After his retirement in 1882, after a second tour locally, General McDowell remained in San Francisco and served on the commission which created Golden Gate Park.

After him in residence in Quarters No. 1 came a long succession of Army leaders, many of them still familiar by name in history books.

Among the Civil War veterans domiciled there were Generals E. O. C. Ord, J. M. Schofield, Phil Sheridan of Winchester fame and John Pope-Nelson Miles, one of the greatest of the Indian fighters, followed them as did Major General Arthur MacArthur, father of Douglas and a great leader in his own name. In his memoirs General Douglas MacArthur recalls visiting Fort Mason while enroute to the Philippines in 1903 and tracking and capturing a military miscreant who was hiding on the brush-covered hillside of the post.

Known better for his Arctic explorations than for any battlefield achievements, Major General A. W. Greely lived in Quarters No. 1 in 1905 - 06. His successor in occupancy as listed on a bronze memorial tablet in the present building, was Major General Fred Funston who directed the Army's great efforts for the assistance of San Francisco in the 1906 earthquake and fire. He also turned the post into a refugee camp, feeding and housing hundreds. On a single night six babies were born in the camp.

Soon after the outbreak of World War II the Army started construction of a new official residence for its western commander at the Presidio of San Francisco. When Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, head of Western Defense Command, moved out of Quarters 1 in 1943, his successor, Lt. General Delos C. Emmons, turned the building over to the Fort Mason Command for use as an Officers' Club.

A second old-time structure, Quarters No. 2, has in modern times housed the Commanding General of the San Francisco Port of Embarkation and its successor, the Pacific Terminal Command. Its historic name is Brook House No. 2, so called because the original Brook House was divided into two residences in the 60's.

An oft-recalled incident of early San Francisco history is reflected in Quarters No. 3, originally Haskell House. It was there that U. S. Senator David Broderick died in 1859 of wounds received in a slavery issue duel with Justice Terry of the State Supreme Court.

Quarters No. 4, now a duplex, was originally the pre-war home of an early banker named Palmer.

A row of family houses on the west side of Franklin Street on the post contains a number put up by the Army in 1864-65.

The 1906 fire also led to the relocation of the burned-out San Francisco Quartermaster Depot to Fort Mason, a change that placed the post in the supply and transportation business, supporting military outposts in the Philippines and China and on Hawaii from 1910 to 1963.

As such it was the control center of a gigantic logistical operation which moved 23 million tons of cargo and over 1 million soldiers into the Pacific to effect the defeat of Japan in World War II. In the Korean war the same headquarters, the San Francisco Port of Embarkation, provided the principal logistical support of the United Nations battle forces.

Prior to and after World War II the Fort Mason piers, built in 1910 - 11, were the principal embarkation and debarkation point for Army personnel moving to and from Pacific bases on the vessels of the famous Army Transport Service.

In 1962, Department of Defense ordered transport operations moved to Oakland, and in July 1963 directed that the major portion of Ft. Mason be declared excess. The western 44.5 acres were turned over to the General Services Administration, which leased the piers and some buildings to non-military agencies and private enterprise. The Army retained the family housing area, Officers and NCO clubs and several other buildings in the eastern section of the post. It is this 25-acre area, with its park-like, verdant grounds, which contributes so much to the scenic nostalgia of old San Francisco.

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